

Reinventing Home Economics in Canada and Africa



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[Photo: Gathering of home economists in Cameroon.]

Today's market economy is highly dependent on the contributions of households to society — contributions that are generally ignored or undervalued by decision makers. Meanwhile, the profession that exists to meet the needs of women and the small-scale economies of households faces an identity crisis: home economics is losing recognition and in some cases its relevance. In Kenya, where the per capita income is about CA\$400 a year, a home economics student may learn how to polish silver, bake cream cakes, and serve afternoon tea. In Canada, the subject has been eliminated from the high school curriculum in several provinces.

These realities are driving an innovative research project initiated by the [Canadian Home Economics Association](#) (CHEA) and funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Its aim is to revitalize home economics by exploring how it can best address the human needs that are most critical in today's world, and improve its practice in both North and South.

The project evolved out of an earlier IDRC research initiative on transforming home economics in East Africa. In 1995, [Lila Engberg](#), the first women member of IDRC's Board of Governors and a Canadian home economist with a long history of working in Africa, served as a resource person for a research workshop conducted by members of the Home Economics Association for Africa. She saw an opportunity to include Canadian home economists who were dealing with similar issues. Collaboration among Africans and Canadians would point to new solutions and build on existing partnerships — the CHEA has worked with African home economists on various projects since 1981. (Most of these have been short-term activities, such as the establishment of daycare centres and the development of textbooks.)

Group discussions

With renewed support from IDRC, three research teams consisting of Canadian and African home economists are using participatory action research methods in focus group discussions. So far, discussions have been held in Cameroon, Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Alberta, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Quebec, involving practitioners, teachers, professors, and students of home economics. In classrooms, people's homes, and over potluck suppers, participants are encouraged to discuss the real-life problems faced by women and families as well as ways to change the nature and practice of home economics.

The profession's plight can be partially blamed on an unsupportive political climate. "The focus of the political and business leaders throughout the world is on macro-economics and the development of big business and industry, an export economy and global markets," says Dr Engberg. "What home economists ought to contribute is a better understanding of what goes on in households and how to support both the non-market and market work done in order to sustain individuals and family life."

Image problem

The research team has found that in many countries, home economists have an image problem. In Canada, they are often associated with 1950's-style homemaking. They are also losing their visibility, in part because of increasing specialization and name changes. Many high school and university home economics programs have been transformed into "family studies" or "human ecology" programs. And in some provinces, high school programs have completely disappeared.

In African countries, home economics is still part of the curriculum but students are often marginalized. In Kenya, for example, secondary school students who are considered "thick" are often directed into home science, which is viewed as an easy subject. At the university level, home economics students enrolled in supporting subjects have been told to leave the room or not pay attention because the lecturers believe that the students, who are mostly women, would not understand the material.

Other difficulties

The curriculum itself poses other difficulties. In many countries, home economics courses do not address real life conditions and problems, ignoring issues as poverty, unemployment, the scarcity of clean water, barriers to education, male dominance, teen pregnancy, and political corruption. Meanwhile, in parts of Zimbabwe, female home economics students are expected to learn such technical tasks as how to vacuum carpets and bake a white cake, even though the ingredients may cost the average person the equivalent of two weeks' worth of income.

"We could try to change a recipe, but that in itself is not a solution," says Dr Engberg. "The project is trying to help African [teachers] examine their educational methods and pay attention to indigenous knowledge, and help students explore their own environment and resources." This means less reliance on textbook learning and more student participation in the classroom and in community projects.

Strengthening leadership

On a broader level in Africa, the project is strengthening the leadership of home economists. The researchers — [Dorothy Jobolingo](#) of Zimbabwe, [Dorothy Rombo-Odero](#) of Kenya, and [Marie Louise Nwafo-Wandji](#) of Cameroon — are working through their national associations to bring about change in their own countries. For example, Nwafo-Wandji succeeded in placing the need to reevaluate her profession's role on the agenda of the annual meeting of the Cameroon Home Economics Association.

In Canada, the project is helping home economists acquire a more global perspective of their problems. "It was heartening to come to the realization that we share a lot of the same issues," says [Maria Mayan](#), a lecturer in the Department of Human Ecology at the University of Alberta.

Turning point

"Right now, we're at a turning point in the profession. If home economics is going to have any meaning and impact, we have to ask who we are, what we are trying to do, and where we want to go in the future," concludes Dr Mayan. "This project asks those hard questions."

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